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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which school experience affects the perceptions and practices of teachers of gifted/talented children. A group of teachers with experience of school programs for gifted/talented children was compared with a group that had not been involved in any special programs. The experienced group showed greater commitment to serving needs of gifted/talented children in the classroom, greater awareness of their special characteristics, greater awareness of the affective domain and its impact on the cognitive domain, greater sensitivity to individual differences, and greater awareness of the importance of curriculum modification. The group without experience had a narrow, absolute conception of giftedness rather than the broader, holistic notion of the experienced group. Both groups of teachers expressed awareness of the need for administrative flexibility to support teachers' special programming efforts. Includes four references. (JDD)

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Abstract

The role of the teacher in providing for all children, particularly young children, and in developing them to their full potential is receiving increasing interest in the research literature.

The intention of this study is to ascertain the impact of experience on teachers' perceptions of gifted and talented, and their ability to identify and provide for gifted and talented children within early education classrooms.

It highlights the significance of teachers' perceptions in identifying and providing for children identified as gifted and talented. It focuses on the factors that encourage or inhibit identification and provision within this context. The impact of the school experience emerges. There are differences in the breadth and scope of teachers' perceptions, their knowledge, acceptance and awareness of individual diffrences in relation to gifted and talented children and their willingness to identify and provide for these differences through differentiated curriculum, enrichment and extension.

This study (McBride, 1988) attempted to examine through the eyes of the classroom teacher what was happening in relation to gifted and talented children within the regular classroom.

It investigated the extent to which "school experience" affects the perceptions and practices of these teachers. One group of teachers had experienced either existing or previous school programs for gifted and talented children ("experienced" group) while the second group had not been involved in any special programs ("other" group). All teachers were within Years 1-3.

The study suggests clear differences in values and beliefs in relation to young gifted and talented children between teachers who have had experience of gifted and talented programs and those who have not. Whether these are a result of personal experiences or school experience is not conclusive from this study. However, because of the clearly positive, supportive sentiments expressed by "experienced" group, it seems reasonable to suggest that school experience is significant. This becomes more clearly evident when this value system is transcribed into principles and guidelines, that is, when it is operationalized. The "experienced" group are more concerned and able to provide for gifted and talented children and show:

. greater commitment to the provision for gifted and talented children within the classroom;

. greater awareness of the special characteristics that apply to the gifted generally;

. greater awareness of specific individual differences with various gifts and talents emerging and being responded to at different developmental stages;

. clearer goals and objectives within their programs;

. awareness of the importance of curriculum modification in terms of goals, content, instructional strategies, resources and evaluation;

. a willingness to provide different educational experiences in terms of depth, breadth and pace within the classroom;

. a greater variety and use of instructional strategies, stressing problem-solving, independence, creativity and higher levels of performance;

. an awareness of organizational and curricula changes that open alternatives and options to teachers and children, such as multi-age classrooms;

. an awareness of the need for an ongoing educational program for the gifted and talented as <u>part</u> of the school system and not a luxury for the "advantaged";

. an awareness of the social and emotional needs of these children.

Both groups expressed concern for and awarreness of:

. the need for various kinds of administrative flexibility which is necessary to support teachers in providing the necessary flexibility in programming within the classroom (McBride, 1988, 142).

School Experience

Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the "climate" of the school in terms of values and attitudes to gifted and talented children makes a difference and ultimately support to the school will provide for both children and teachers. Even the most energetic and aware teacher can become daunted if left to crusade alone. *School experience does make a difference.* The "experienced" group displayed more awareness and use of enrichment and extention procedures within the classroom. The "other" group felt this should happen but were less able to provide for this or justify it. The "experienced" group considers enrichment feasible because:

. it allows for intra-class provisions;

. it is fair;

. it does not require administrative adaptation;

. it encourages gifted children to learn to work with all children;

. it is not regarded as creating an "elite" group;

. it creates less emotional and social problems as the gifted and talented are with children of similar ages (McBride, 1988, 144).

Perceptions

The "experienced" group display a greater depth, breadth and scope in relation to their perceptions, definition and acceptance of gifted and talented children than the "other" group. The "experienced" group see gifted as a broader, holistic notion more in line with Gardner's (1980) multi-faceted intelligence. The "other" group see identification as directed towards uncovering that magic piece of evidence that will tell if a child is "really gifted". This "absolute" conception of giftedness tends to lead to an impasse in terms of operationalizing and differentiating programs, i.e., gifted is "something you have" or "you don't have", and it will show itself no matter what. This narrow concept of giftedness creates an inactive state when curriculum modification is involved. It tends to emphasize those students who are good risk takers or lesson learners in a traditional learning situation. The "experienced" group appear to be more mindful of the difference between "gifted behaviour" and "being gifted", rather than seeing the gifted as an amorphous mass.

This group display more awareness of the importance of the affectivie domain and its impact on cognitive development. They

expressed more concern with catering for children so that they were not bored or underachieving and displayed more awareness of the literature, research, resources - both material and human - networks and associations.

It is reasonable to speculate that this heightened awareness of the "experienced" group in relation to gifted and talented children is caused in part by the school experience. This experience allows the teachers to see the advantages of professional intervention to both teachers and children in the areas of classroom provision. The teachers are in receipt of information referring to "the degree of brightness" which gives more specific details of the area in which the child shows special aptitudes.

Individuals' Difference

This greater awareness also creates a sensitivity to, acceptance and awareness of individual differences within the gifted and talented group, reflected in classroom practices and teaching strategies. The "experienced" group emphasizes the child centred curriculum (multi-age grouping) emphasizing the different cognitive and affective processes. The 'other' group gravitates more towards content centred, memory oriented curriculum with an acceptance of the lock step system of age related grades. They display a functionalism rather than a humanism.

School Policy

The knowledge of and attitude towards school policy for the gifted and talented students provide another area of great difference between the groups. The "experienced" group are more concerned about the provision for gifted and talented children and regarded it as an issue. The "other" group do not see school policy for the gifted and talented as an issue and feel such things as "sexism, multiculturalism" are far more important at the moment.

The ability of "experienced" group to identify substantially more gifted and talented children than the "other" group raises questions about the teachers, their knowledge, skills and techniques and their teaching methods.

Teacher Expectations

It is difficult to acept as coincidence that there are so few gifted children in the "other" groups and so many more in the" experienced" groups. The teacher effect in terms of expectation, awareness and teaching methods cannot be discounted. There is evidence to support the need for classroom teachers to be exposed to a wider variety of teacher methods as well as be more fully informed in terms of individual differences, development and characteristics for identification of the gifted and talented children. They need an awareness of racial, ethnic or minority groups, culturally different or disadvantaged, handicapped groups and students who display various types of behavioural problems in the classroom, such as short interest span, distractive movements, disruptive-

ness, high energy level, continuous questioning and intense anxiety in order to adapt and modify existing practices (Braggett, 1985a,1985b). None of this will come to fruition unless a genuine need is perceived by practitioners and those to whom they are directly responsible (principals, administrators). The teacher is the key.

Ewald Nyquist (source unknown) states:

> The one essential point in the whole education system is the point of contact between teacher and child. It is to make this contact between teacher and child as fruitful as possible that everything else - authority, administration, curriculum - exists. If the system fails to work at this point of contact, it fails everywhere. (McBride, 1988,143)

The teacher is <u>not</u> an island; the teacher needs support, ongoing and in relation to demand, without fear of recrimination. There are no short-term solutions, however there is a real need for commitment from administrators as well as teachers. The evidence is clearly in line with Renzulli's (1984, 3) statement:

> The sad but true fact is that we can't really develop respectable evaluation designs when our programs are little more than patchwork collections of <u>random practices and activities</u>. (Emphasis added)(McBride, 1988,143)

This research suggests it is at the recognition of values and belief level that the first differences appear. Without a firmly established set of beliefs based on knowledge and understanding, not prejudice, it is impossible to create a workable set of principles or guidelines. A "top-down" authoritarian approach to educational practice is generally met with resistance and/or rejection in a passive manner. The use of a genuine consultative approach is one way of intervening.

There is a need for a local (school level) change agent in the form of a knowledgeable, committed and involved facilitator or facilitators.

Conclusions

This study showed the main differences between the "experienced" and "other" groups were:

. the breadth, depth and scope of their perceptions about, definitions of and acceptance of gifted and talented children;

. awareness of the affective domain and its impact on the cognitive domain;

. sensitivity to differences, awareness of and acceptance of individual differences.

The "other" group displayed significantly less of all of these characteristics than the "experienced" group. Overall, the differences between the groups were in degree rather than kind. It was more at the operational level than at the conceptual level.

There was a school experience effect displayed through the difference in perceptions, identification procedures and provision of the "experienced" group compared with the "other" group. Both groups considered early identification was important.

The "experienced" group displayed greater -

. concern with each child, making a conscious effort to develop and foster diversity;

. recognition and provision for the diversity of attributes with classroom;

. commitment to child centred education, with provision for differentiated rates and styles of learning;

. willingness to diverge from the basics of syllabus related work;

. assessment of the child in terms of mastery rather than chronological age.

There is a case for intervention in the early years in order to adequately "provide the opportunity for the capacities of each person to be developed to the fullest". The young gifted and talented must not be overlooked. This intervention needs to be at the pre-service and inservice levels.

The current study reflects this and at the preservice level substantiates Gallagher's (1985) comments on teacher training, suggesting that teachers "do not read", and hence techniques other than writing books and providing packages need to be found to help teachers improve their skills. The real changes that occurred in attitudes and practice were a result of a change agent, i.e., "school experience", in the form of gifted resource teachers, university personnel and guidance officers within individual schools. These changes were in response to sustained practice and support, not just theoretical ideals.

The implications for preservice are clear. There is a need for greater exposure to "enriched" classroom on a regular basis in order to provide continuity of experience and practice with a variety of teaching strategies and curriculum modifications.

There is a need for inservice in the area of perception, identification and provision for the gifted and talented in the

early years. "

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